

## KRISHNA AND HIS SONG

By the same author -

What is Hinduism ?

Gandhi Sutras

A Primer of Hinduism

Lectures on the Bhagavad-Gita

The Bhagavad Gita

A Book of Indian Culture—Compilation

Presented to Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's Library  
from the private collection of  
Late Shri B. N. Motiwala by Mrs. Motiwala.

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BY

D. S. SARMA, M. A.

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## CHAPTER I

### KRISHNA AND HIS SONG

Krishna the God of the *Gita*, is the Beloved of India. To his reign in the hearts of Hindus there seems to be no end. Every generation adds something of its own experience to that enchanting stream of love and beauty which sprang centuries ago from his mysterious personality. Epics, Puranas, dramas, stories, songs and systems of philosophy during the last three thousand years known to history have not exhausted that fountain of life. From the village maidens that sing of his love to-day to the heads of monasteries who expound his doctrine, the hold of Krishna over the hearts of the people in India is unique. His life and teaching bring a warm current of joy into the somewhat cold Brahmanical ethic of austerity and other-

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worldliness. Had it not been for him, this world and the next world have fallen apart for Indian humanity. He has taught them that spiritual life is not an arid desert of repressions and privations, but a fertile valley in which love and friendship art and poetry and wisdom and valour have a place. He has not only taught the doctrine, but also lived it. For viewed as a whole in its broad outlines, the career of Krishna even in its most legendary forms, is only the *Bhagavad Gita* writ large. Therein lies the uniqueness of this Avatar. For Krishna is not only a great Teacher like the founder of Buddhism, but also a great man of action who took a leading part in the political drama of his age. It was Bhishma the wisest man of that age, who first declared that Krishna was an Avatar and the world has since accepted him as such. From the day when a voice was heard from heaven announcing his birth to the day when a hunter's dart was the *Nimittam* of his passing away he fulfilled the purpose of an Avatar as defined in the *Gita* —

Whenever there is a decline of Dharma  
O Arjuna, and an outbreak of  
Adharma,



I incarnate myself  
For the protection of the Good for  
the destruction of the evil and for the  
establishment of Dharma I am born  
from age to age.

(*Bhagavad Gita* IV 7 8)

It is idle to discuss the historicity of such a character as Krishna, who is more real to countless generations of men than their own flesh and blood. There has recently been a controversy between two eminent French scholars about Jesus Christ—one holding that Jesus was a man who like Moses or Mohammad founded a religion and who was deified by his followers after his death and the other holding that he was a God like Attis or Osiris who lived at first only in the imaginations of men but who was provided later by his followers with a fictitious biography, as if he had come down and lived on earth like a man. According to the former Jesus became Christ and so he was a man god, and according to the latter Christ became Jesus and so he was a god man. Such antithetical views ignore the truth about incarnation which is neither merely a historical nor a philosophical truth, but a poetic truth. In all great poetry we have a harmony of the real and the ideal.

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The ideal incarnates itself in and through the real. And if the process continues unchecked through several ages, varying legends gather round the historical nucleus overwhelming both the real and the ideal with what is false.

This is what has happened to the *Mahabharata* and inevitably therefore to the life of Krishna. That Krishna the son of Devaki the Chief of the Vrishnis the friend of the Pandavas and the founder of the Bhagavata theism, is a historical figure there is not the shadow of a doubt. But, as with all other founders of religions the accounts that we have of him are of a much later date than his life. And legend and myth and interpolation have interfered so much with historical materials that criticism can never hope to bring order out of chaos, unless it chooses to be as arbitrary and fanciful as the creating process has been. This is the case with the accounts we have of Buddha, Christ and Mohammad. Who can say for instance that all the miracles of Christ in the Gospels are historical facts? Why, the higher criticism of the Bible is now forced to conclude that even the famous Sermon on the Mount was historically

neither one sermon, nor was it delivered on any mount. The problem of historicity in the case of Krishna becomes much more complicated if we accept the views of some scholars that in this Avatar we have the confluence of four streams of religious thought, viz one having its source in Vishnu the Vedic God one in Narayana the philosophic god one in Vasudeva, the historical founder of Bhagavata religion and one in Gopala, the pastoral god of the tribe of Abhiras. However that may be it is obvious that in the Krishna literature of even the earliest period we have different portraits of the hero at different moral and spiritual levels. The portraiture reaches its highest level of course in the *Bhagavad Gita*. But when once the Avatarhood was established by the teaching of this marvellous book all other parts of Krishna literature also became acceptable to the community even the most unedifying interpolations. And by a confusion in thought some people even began to interpret the Upanishadic conception of the Supreme Deity transcending the moral categories of good and evil in terms of a Divine Person taking part with perfect freedom in evil as well as in good while

as a matter of fact the two conceptions are the poles asunder

The earliest mention of Krishna, the son of Devaki, is in the *Chandogya Upanishad* where he appears as a pupil whose thirst for knowledge was satisfied by the teaching of Ghora Angirasa that a man's life is his true *Yagna* or sacrifice. It is well known that in the *Bhagavad Gita* we have a similar but a more comprehensive view of *Yagna*. The *Chandogya Upanishad* is one of the oldest of the Upanishads and Western scholars assign it generally to the sixth century B.C. Then we have a reference to Vasudeva and Arjuna as two deities in Panini's grammar, which belongs to the fourth century B.C. And about 300 B.C. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador at the court of Chandragupta, speaks of the Krishna worship at Mathura. There are also references to Krishna in early Buddhist and Jaina scriptures. The *Ghata Jataka*, which probably belongs to the third century B.C., describes him as a contemporary of Ghata, the Bodhisattva one of the predecessors of Buddha, and the *Uttaradhyayana Sutra* makes him a contemporary of Anishtanemi, the twenty second Tirthankara. If the latter



reference is true, Krishna must have flourished in the ninth century B.C. But these Buddhist and Jain descriptions are as fanciful as those of our Puranas.

Whatever we may make of even the authentic scattered references mentioned above, our earliest authority for the life of Krishna is, of course, the *Mahabharata*. That great epic, in its present form, is generally assigned to the second century B.C. But it is admitted by all that its origin was much earlier, probably the fifth century B.C., and that the incidents it relates are of still earlier date. And it should be noted that it is only the events of Krishna's manhood and later life that are narrated in the *Mahabharata*.

The epic, being mainly the history of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, passes over the early life of Krishna with only the bare mention of his birth in Mathura and the names of his parents. There is no mention at all of his life among the cowherds in Gokul. Much later than the *Mahabharata* came the *Hanuvansa*, which now appears as an appendix to the epic. And to the same period also belongs the *Vishnu Purana*. These two works are assigned to the fourth century of the

Christian era, but there is no doubt that they were prepared out of very old materials and oral traditions about Krishna long current in Mathura. They presuppose the *Mahabharata* account of the life of Krishna, but set forth in great detail the exploits of his early life—his fun and frolic as a child, his singing and dancing, his winsome ways, his feats of strength and his killing of a number of giants. But the classical rendering of this part of Krishna's life, which has made an indelible impression on the imagination of India and which has given rise to a number of Bhakti schools—those of Madhva Vishnusvarnu Nimbarka, Vallabha and Chaitanya—is found in that immortal book, the *Bhagavata Purana* which belongs to the ninth century after Christ.

The *Bhagavata* confines itself to the early life of Krishna, brings new materials and concentrates all its power on the idyllic romance of Brindaban and the boundless emotion it generates in the hearts of the faithful. It goes far beyond the *Harivamsa* and the *Vishnu Purana* in its accounts of Krishna and the Gopis, who loved him almost to madness. It is difficult to say whether the author

meant to write a great religious allegory or a religious romance. But it is certain that he has succeeded in producing one of the most seminal books in the religious literature of India. The familiar picture of Krishna playing on a flute under the shade of a tree, while a cow licks his foot and the entranced Gopis look on with hungry eyes, thus combining into one *motif* the power of music the power of beauty the power of love and the harmony of man with nature—a picture which along with that of the coronation of Rama has, since the Renaissance of Hinduism taken the place of the earlier picture of Dhyani Buddha sitting cross-legged in Yogic pose—is derived from the *Bhagavata Purana*. It is this picture of the Avatar that comes to our minds when the name of Krishna is mentioned rather than that of Krishna teaching the *Gita* to Arjuna on the field of battle. The Avatar of the *Mahabharata* is only for the thinking few. But the Avatar of the *Bhagavata* is enshrined in the loving hearts of millions of men and women in India.

It is remarkable that there is no mention of Radha by name either in the *Hammamsa* or the *Vishnu Purana* or the

by Vallabha and Chaitanya in the sixteenth century in this exaltation of Radha.

Five Schools of Bhakti arose out of the *Bhagavata Purana*—those of Madhva, Vishnusvami, Nimbarka, Vallabha and Chaitanya. In all of them the worship of Krishna is the central feature. But Madhva does not recognise Radha at all, Vishnusvami treats her only as a favourite Gopi, while Nimbarka, Vallabha and Chaitanya make her Krishna's consort. The last step in this development was apparently taken by the Radha-Vallabhi sect founded at Brindaban towards the end of the sixteenth century by one Hari Vamsa. This sect was influenced by Saktism. It places Radha above Krishna for, according to it, Radha is the Queen of the World and Krishna is only her agent.

It is not inconceivable that just as imagination played round the figure of Radha during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of the Christian era in the broad daylight of history, so had it played with much greater freedom round the figure of Krishna during those dim pre-historic centuries when the *Mahabharata* was in the making. Mythology is the history of the heart. The story of Radha

the *Gita* teaching is cast and to appreciate the dramatic moment in which it is introduced in the great epic. But it is very necessary that we should clearly understand at the outset the position of Arjuna at the beginning of this discourse. In the first chapter, entitled "The Grief of Arjuna", he speaks the following words "Far better would it be for me if the sons of Dhritarashtra weapons in hand should slay me in the battle, while I remain unresisting and unarmed"

This looks startlingly like the attitude of a non violent Satyagrahi, after Gandhiji's own heart. In fact it has been said by some critics of the *Gita* that the classical utterance on non violence is put in the mouth of Arjuna in the verse quoted above, while the whole teaching of Krishna is an exhortation to violence. Therefore, according to these critics, Arjuna represents a higher morality than Krishna, but his fine feelings are crushed and violence is done to his higher nature by the advice of his friend. There could be no greater mistake than this. To make Arjuna an advocate of non violence and Krishna an advocate of violence is to turn the whole scripture topsy-

turvy and to misunderstand its teaching entirely. Let us examine the position

Arjuna is the hero of the epic. He is the chosen instrument of divine justice. To him is assigned by the poet the most important rôle in the great war. He has long been consecrated to this task. His whole life has been a preparation for it. And now, when the critical moment comes, he falters. He is swayed by personal feelings and hesitates to obey the stern call of duty. He fails to become the instrument of divine justice because the consequences are painful to him. He is convinced that his cause is righteous. He knows that his brother Dharmaraja is the very embodiment of righteousness, while the enemy Duryodhana is the very embodiment of wickedness and that it is his duty as a Kshatriya prince to overthrow the evil which has been so long and so shamelessly triumphant in the land. He has accordingly come to the battle field with the intention of fighting and has led thither a host of allied armies. The hopes of the whole army are centred on him and his well known prowess. And now suddenly he refuses to fight because he has to

slay so many of his kinsmen and friends ranged on the other side. It is not at all a question of non violence with him. For he has no objection to fighting or killing as such. He has no objection to killing those who are not his kinsmen. He harps upon the painfulness of killing his Svajana —a word that he repeats five times in his argument.

To compare him to a Satyagrahi is only to betray one's ignorance of Satyagraha. For Arjuna does not propose to fight untruth by truth or violence by non violence. His mind is clouded by sorrow. He would rather submit to injustice than fight. And he has no idea of wearing the evil doer from evil by his own sacrifice and thus breaking the vicious circle. He is represented by the poet simply as the supreme example of a man who is tempted to desert his post of duty at a critical hour because the consequences of remaining there are extremely painful to him. His position is similar to that of a judge who hesitates to pronounce the sentence of death on his own son who has been proved in his court to be guilty of murder. Only in the case of Arjuna the prospect of gaining a kingdom by

killing his kinsmen in the battle makes the situation more complex and, of course, more true to life. His resolution to forgo his gain rather than do violence to his dearly cherished affections clouds the whole issue for the casual reader as well as for Arjuna himself. The Kshatriya prince, instead of appearing in his true colours here as one falling short of heroism actually poses in his self righteousness as the exponent of a type of heroism even superior to that of his class. We surely misunderstand the situation if from the accident that Arjuna is willing to forgo his kingdom we infer that he is a non violent hero or a conscientious objector. His divine charioteer, being a searcher of hearts knows better. He is not baffled by the objections trotted out by Arjuna. He quietly snubs his friend's self righteousness by saying ironically, "You speak words of wisdom", and proceeds with the task of enlightening him.

Similarly, to think that there is divine sanction for the violence of war in the *Gita* because Krishna advises Arjuna to do his duty on the battle field, is to miss entirely the import of the great scripture. Some years ago we were horrified to



learn that the *Gita* was being quoted by the Indian anarchists in defence of their destructive activities. And even to-day this scripture is quoted by those who oppose Gandhiji's doctrine of non violence. They say that his teaching contradicts that of the *Gita* and some of them have even gone so far as to say that it is alien to the spirit of Hinduism forgetting that Hinduism is the only religion which teaches that non violence is the highest duty.

The fact is that the *Gita* is not concerned with the question of war as an instrument of justice among nations any more than Jesus Christ was concerned with the question of the subjection of the Jews to the Roman Empire. The aim of all the great scriptures of the world is to lift man from the animal plane to a divine plane by revealing to him the paths of ascent to a higher and higher perfection. But we have to remember two things about them. First the scriptures of a race form a progressive revelation. The Spirit never ceases to grow. For God lives for ever and He ever manifests himself in the lives of the saints. Therefore as we rise in the scale of spiritual values we discover higher

and higher laws. And when the higher law is revealed the lower one is abrogated. Secondly the great scriptures of the world are not produced *in vacuo*. The messengers of God come in human form. They belong to a certain age, a certain society and a certain country. Therefore their spiritual message is inevitably covered with the husk of political, social and scientific ideas of their times. And it is the task of the wise man to separate the husk from the kernel. He should clearly see and frankly admit that belief in a particular political doctrine or a particular social order is the perishable part of a scripture. It is the husk that covers the living seed. Half the degradations that flourish under the name of religion are due to our frequent inability to separate what is permanent from what is temporary or accidental in our scriptures. Surely Christ's belief that evil spirits cause disease and his expectation that the world would come to an end shortly belong to the latter category. So do the battle of Kurukshetra, the Indian caste system and the Sankhya philosophy mentioned in the *Gita*. Moreover, how could we expect the *Gita* written some centuries before

the Christian era to preach directly the abolition of war when even twenty centuries after the beginning of that era mankind still looks upon war as a legitimate weapon and resorts to it with far fewer moral restrictions? Non violence among nations if made possible by international courts of arbitration, is undoubtedly as superior to war as an honourable war a *dharma-yudha*, described by our ancient epic poets, is superior to the modern massacres with aerial bombs poison gases and secret mines. When the enlightened conscience of humanity comes to look upon war as a horrid business unworthy of man and perfects a machinery by which it is made impossible it will disappear like Suttie and slavery and no misreading of the scriptures can stay the progress of man.

But meanwhile let us see whether the *Gita* really supports violence, or on the contrary as Mahatma Gandhi contends, it supports non violence. Ahimsa or non violence is four times expressly mentioned in the *Gita* as a great virtue (X 5 XIII 7 XVI 2 and XVII 14). Apart from that, we are taught that before we take part in any activity we should free our minds from anger fear and

hatred, remove every trace of selfish desire from our hearts, look upon all creatures in their pleasures and pains as ourselves, have the same regard for friend and foe, and above all possess an unswerving devotion to God and His purposes in the world. This in brief, as we shall see, is the Karma Yoga that the *Gita* teaches. Even in the verses where Arjuna is specifically asked to fight, the conditions imposed on him are such as to make his action practically non violent. Let us take four such passages —

Pleasure and pain, gain and loss victory and defeat—treat them alike and gird thyself for the fight. Thus thou wilt not incur sin. (II 38)

Surrender—all thy works to me and fight, with thy mind in union with the Spirit and free from every desire and trace of self and all thy passion spent (III 30)

\*Therefore at all times think on me and fight. When thy mind and understanding are fixed on me thou shalt doubtless come to me. (VIII 7)

He who is free from the notion of "I" and whose understanding is unsullied, though he slays these men he slays not nor is he bound. (XVIII 17)

From all this we see that Krishna, far from advocating violence, thoroughly

undermines the position of violence, takes away the substance and retains only the outer shell. That was all probably that he could do in his day. If his conditions are satisfied there can be no violence at all. For how is it possible for a man to resort to violence without anger, without hatred without desire and without passion of any kind? A man who has all these qualifications, even when he kills, cannot be considered guilty of violence. He kills in the same way as the mother goddess kills Mahishasura in the famous sculpture at Mahabalipuram. For in this master piece of art we see the demon in a fury of passion, while the Devi seated on the lion's back is serene and calm, with no trace of anger or hatred and with no glow of triumph on her face. Thus does Krishna by his teaching try to change the whole mental background of the fighting man into one of pure non violence while he keeps only the external physical form of violence. All that Mahatma Gandhi is doing to-day is to push the *Gita* to its logical conclusion to make us take the last step and throw away even the shell and thus embrace non violence in both form and substance. His Satyagraha is therefore only a fulfilment of the *Gita*.

## CHAPTER III

### THE LAYMAN'S UPANISHAD

The *Gita* consists of eighteen chapters. At the end of every chapter there is a colophon which clearly indicates the intention and the scope of the scripture. It runs thus — In the song of the Lord which is an *Upanishad* which is the science of the Absolute, which is the scripture of Yoga and which is the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna this is the chapter by name,

To begin with the scripture is described as the Lord's song. It is a song not a philosophical treatise. We know that it arises out of a tense emotional crisis when a great epic hero the terror of his enemies is moved to tears at the thought of the impending carnage. Hence it is the logic of the heart that determines the trend of the argument.

not cold reason. This fact is forgotten by those who complain of repetitions, overlappings, inconsistencies and the inexact use of words in the *Gita*. A song is not a text book. It does not give you definitions headings and logical steps. Its appeal is more to the heart and the imagination than to the understanding. All the great scriptures of the world are akin to poetry and song. The inspired utterances of Yagnavalkya in the *Upanishads*, the parables of Jesus, the dialogues of Buddha and the discourses of Mohammad are first-class poetry. Systems of philosophy may be built on them afterwards, and scholars may wrangle about their interpretation. But originally they were the creations of the Spirit, as mountains and forests are the creations of Nature, and like mountains and forests they are irregular, not neatly arranged. There have been hundreds of commentaries written on the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Scholars have waged pitched battles over the interpretation of some of its passages and various sects quote from it in defence of their own doctrines. But amidst all this clatter the *Gita* remains an enchanting song like the one that flowed from Krishna's flute.

on the banks of the Yamuna

The *Gita* is then described as an *Upanishad*. It is a layman's Upanishad, as the *Mahābhārata* is a layman's *Veda*. The mystical teachings of the *Upanishads* were originally meant only for the adepts, just as the study of the *Vedas* was confined to certain classes. But Krishna opened the door of heaven to all, irrespective of caste or sex. He extracted the essence of all the *Upanishads* and gave it to the world through Arjuna. A well known witty verse compares the *Upanishads* to cows, Arjuna to a calf and the *Gita* to milk. Krishna is, of course, the cowherd. A close study of the *Gita* will reveal echoes from the *Upanishads* at every turn. The *Kathopanishad* is specially laid under contribution. Six or seven of the *Gita* verses are practically quotations from this *Upanishad* and there are a good many expressions reminiscent of the older scripture. Several important passages in the *Gita* can similarly be traced to the *Isa*, the *Mundaka* or the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*. Thus the Avatar is fully justified in claiming, as he does, that he is "the maker of Vedānta and the knower of the *Veda*" (*Gita* XV 15). But the differ-



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proud pigmy self The *Gita* no doubt, insists on the control of the senses and of the mind as the stoics do but says clearly that this discipline has its fulfilment in the vision of God

The objects of senses fall away from the embodied soul when it ceases to feed on them, but the taste for them is left behind. Even the taste falls away when the Supreme is seen. (II 59)

Similarly to speak of the *Gita* as a gospel merely of social service is to narrow the scope of the scripture unduly The *Gita* in a famous phrase *lokasaṁgraha* which is not found in the *Upanishads* no doubt insists on the duty of promoting the welfare of the world but it does not substitute Humanity for God The religious *mān* is taught to worship God not society Divine service should come first and social service after The greatest social service in the world is done by those who have unshakable faith in God Humanitarian zeal will come of its own accord to a man who has first learnt to love God So love of God and knowledge of God are made the motives of human action in the *Gita*

We next come to the term *Yoga* *sastra* in the colophon. Yoga is the

key word in the *Bhagavad Gita*. He who has not understood the full connotation of that word has not understood the scripture. Unfortunately the word has now become so narrowed in meaning and is so often used in a technical sense that one has to make a special effort to grasp the wider sense in which it is used in the *Gita*. Yoga literally means *union*. The Sanskrit word *yoga* and the English word *yoke* are cognate terms. The former is used in the *Gita* in the sense of fellowship with God. God himself is called *Yogesvara* the man who tries to live in fellowship with him is called a *yogi* and the scripture which helps him in the attempt is termed *yoga sastra*. And as this fellowship has to be won in all possible ways through active service through loving devotion through serene contemplation and through intuitive insight, we have such subdivisions of yoga as *karma yoga* (the yoga of action) *bhakti yoga* (the yoga of devotion) *dhyana yoga* (the yoga of contemplation) and *jñāna yoga* (the yoga of knowledge). These correspond to the functions of the mind. They are not water tight compartments any more than are the will feeling and

understanding which constitute our mental life. They are the various aspects of a single reality namely spiritual life. Now we may emphasize one aspect and call it karma yoga and now another aspect calling it bhakti yoga and again a third aspect and call it jnana yoga. But it should not be forgotten that they can never be separated from one another. We speak of vowels and consonants for the sake of analysis but we know that they are always found only in combination in living speech. Similarly for the sake of analysis we may divide and subdivide yoga but in actuality it is one and it is treated as such in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Therefore it is idle to dispute whether the *Gita* is a gospel of karma yoga or of bhakti yoga or of jnana yoga. It is a gospel of yoga. It is a gospel of spiritual life in its entirety.

Some commentators have divided the eighteen chapters of the scripture into three equal sections and have stated that the first section deals with karma yoga the second with bhakti yoga and the third with jnana yoga. This division is rather unsatisfactory. For instance in the first section which is supposed to deal with karma yoga we have a mag

nificent prāṇ on jñāna in the last nine verses of the fourth chapter. Again in the second section, which is supposed to deal with bhakti yoga, the first fifteen verses of the seventh chapter are about jñāna, not bhakti. Instances like these may be multiplied indefinitely. The fact is that the *Gita* is unique among our scriptures in that it deals with spiritual life as an organic whole and never loses sight of the vital connection between one part of it and another. Its theme is a living reality and not a dead abstraction. In its view karma, jñāna and bhakti are the inseparable elements of spiritual life. Take, for instance, the following verse —

But men of righteous deeds in whom sin has come to an end—they are free from the delusion of the pairs of opposites and worship Me, steadfast in their vows (VII, 28)

Have we not got here all the three main elements in natural combination? Righteous deeds point to karma, freedom from delusion points to jñāna, and worship points to bhakti. Or again take this verse which, according to Sankara, contains the essence of the whole *Gita* teaching —

He who does my work and regards me as his goal who worships me without attachment and who is without hatred towards any creature—he comes to me O Arjuna (XI 55)

Throughout the scripture this balance is maintained. Thus when the *Gita* is described as a yoga-sastra what is meant is that it is a gospel of spiritual life which leads man to union with God. The yoga that is taught by Krishna is not the technical yoga of Patanjali. It does not consist of a series of exercises in thought-control. Unfortunately in modern times yoga has come to mean in our minds only these exercises. The first thing that we have to do if we want to understand the *Gita*, is to put away from our minds this narrow technical meaning of yoga and to grasp the wider sense in which the word is used in this scripture. We cannot remind ourselves too often that yoga in the *Bhagavad Gita* covers the entire religious experience of man.

— We now come to the last term in the colophon, namely, that the *Gita* is a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. Here again there are a number of implications. The dialogue is a traditional

literary form through which instruction is conveyed by the teacher to the pupil. The *Upānshads* are full of dialogues. The *Mahabhārata* itself is a dialogue within a dialogue. The originality of the *Gita*, however, consists in the dramatic moment chosen for the dialogue and in the unique character of the personages taking part in it as well as in the comprehensive nature of the subjects dealt with. The *Gita* is placed at the very focus as it were, of the great national epic, and the dialogue is made impressive by the presence of the embattled hosts on either side in the background of the picture. While the dialogue is going on, the fate of nations hangs in the balance. The course of history will depend upon the upshot of this conversation. And who are the interlocutors? Who is the Guru and who is the Sishya? Krishna and Arjuna represent God and man. So it is a dialogue between God and man, and the implication is that the teaching is supremely authoritative.



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able rules imposed by an external authority. It becomes organic when it grows according to the law of its own being, ever adjusting its means to its end. The end is yoga or union with God and the aim of all rules of dharma is to promote that end. Dharma is no dharma when it does not lead us into fellowship with God, when it is not vitally connected with yoga. In every age our rules of dharma are only the imperfect means by which we seek to realise the perfections of God. And as our knowledge of the divine being grows, we have to revise our rules and thus improve our means. One has only to read the ancient codes of law and ethics of any country to see how many of the rules solemnly laid down have become thoroughly obsolete. We know how the conscience of humanity has improved or is improving with regard to the "sacred" duties of taking revenge, of conducting religious persecutions and of offering animal sacrifices. How terribly stunted would mankind be if nations could not step out of 'the eternal dharmas of tribe and clan'?

Thus the dialogue begins with a rigid, mechanical conception of dharma on the

part of Arjuna and ends with the exposition of an organic conception of dharma rooted in yoga on the part of Krishna. The Bhagvan has given us the final word not on the forms of dharma—for that has to be determined by ourselves for our age and by those who come after us for their age—but on the principle of growth in dharma. This world is a school where humanity is still in the lower classes painfully learning its graded lessons from the great teachers who arise from age to age, inspired by God. As it proceeds from class to class text books are superseded but the principles of instruction remain the same. For instance on the field of Kurukshetra the violence of war is admitted as a legitimate weapon after peaceful negotiations have failed though non violence is given a high place in the list of virtues. The advocacy of non violence as a substitute for war is reserved for future incarnations.

We have already said that the *Gita* is a practical gospel with the help of which every one of us can order his life and discharge his duties as they should be discharged. Its aim is to convert us from men of the world into men of God.

Yoga or fellowship with God has to replace Sanga or attachment to the world. Every one of us is a Sakta or a worldly man to start with. Our actions are prompted by self interest. We are slaves to our desires. We live in a small world of our own making, like frogs in a well. It is such blind creatures that the Gita proposes to take in hand with the object of making every one of them a Yukta or a man in fellowship with God. Outwardly there may be no difference at all between a Sakta and a Yukta. Both may live laborious days, both may come into conflict with others and both may have their successes and their defeats. But internally they are poles asunder. Delusion and restlessness and self-centred desire in the one have given place to vision, peace and self forgetting love in the other. How is this transfiguration to be effected? How is a Sakta or worldly man to be converted into a Yukta or spiritual man, and a Yukta into a Nitya yukta, one who lives in constant fellowship with God? That is the burden of Krishna's song.

The divine Teacher takes the unregenerate man as he finds him—a

child of both earth and heaven—and recognises his dual nature. For he says —

From whatever wombs living forms may arise, O Arjuna, great Nature is their womb and I am the generating father. (XIV 4)

\*If God is our father, Nature is our mother. It is one of the unique features of the *Gita* that it not only recognises this fact, but also bases its whole teaching on it. As we shall see, its gospel of *Svadharmā* is nothing but a sublimation of man's own nature, a directing of the individual's gifts to a higher end. The full significance of the *Gita* passages stressing the importance of the force of nature in the economy of spiritual life can be realised only in a scientific age like our own. As sufficient attention has not been drawn to them, we shall quote some of them here —

‘Every one is driven to act in spite of himself, by the impulses of Nature.’ (III 5)

‘All beings follow their nature. What can repression do?’ (III 33)

“Those whose judgments are swayed by various desires resort to other gods, being overpowered by their own natures and observing diverse rituals.” (VII 20)



"Controlling Nature which is my own, I send forth again and again all this multitude of beings which are helpless under the sway of Nature." (IX. 8)

"The faith of every man O Arjuna, is in accordance with his natural disposition." (XVII 3)

'There is no creature here on earth, nor again among the gods in heaven, which is free from these three dispositions of Nature.' (XVIII 40)

"He who does the duty imposed on him by his own nature incurs no sin." (XVIII 47)

"One ought not to give up the work which is suited to one's own nature, O Arjuna though it has its imperfections" (XVIII 48)

Fettered by thine own tendencies O Arjuna which are born of nature, that which through delusion thou seekest not to do—thou shalt do even against thy will" (XVIII 60)

The overpowering influence of natural dispositions is further indicated in the last two chapters of the *Gita* by the elaborate classification each into three categories, of the following twelve concepts faith food sacrifice, penance, charity renunciation, knowledge, deed, doer, understanding steadiness and pleasure. Also it is the basis of the classification of men into the two types of the

godly and the ungodly in the sixteenth chapter

From all these passages it is plain that according to Krishna the natural endowments of a man cannot be ignored in any scheme of spiritual discipline. There is no real antagonism between nature and spirit. They appear as irreconcilable foes only in the writings of lesser teachers, not in those of the great masters. Accordingly though sense-control is stressed on almost every page of the *Gita*, the teaching never degenerates into mere asceticism. On the other hand excessive mortification of the flesh is condemned in no uncertain terms. Take for instance the following passages —

Yoga is not for him who eats too much, nor for him who eats too little. It is not for him, O Arjuna, who sleeps too much, nor for him who keeps vigil too long. But for the man who is temperate in his food and recreation, who is restrained in all his actions and who has regulated his sleep and vigils, yoga puts an end to all sorrow. (VI 16 and 17)

Vain and conceited men, impelled by the force of their desires and passions, subject themselves to terrible mortifications not ordained by scriptures. And being foolish they torture

their bodily organs and me also who dwell within the body. Know that such men are fiendish in their resolves." (XVII 5 and 6)

So the natural man in us is neither to be suppressed nor indulged. He is to be wisely controlled and properly directed. In other words, we should learn to move amidst the sense objects with an easy self mastery, neither attracted nor repelled by them.

"A man of disciplined mind who moves among the objects of sense with his senses fully under his control and free from love and hate—he attains to a clear vision" (II 64)

The same idea is also figuratively expressed —

'Some offer as sacrifice their hearing and other senses in the fires of restraint; while others offer sound and other objects of sense in the fires of their senses.' (IV 26)

We now understand why the Teacher points out what kind of food is the best for the body and what type of pleasure is the best for the mind.

"Foods that promote length of life, vitality, strength, health, happiness and cheerfulness and those that are sweet, oily, nourishing and agreeable are the favourites of the good. Foods that are bitter, sour, salted over-

hot, pungent, dry and burning, those that produce pain, grief and disease are liked by the passionate. And that which is not freshly cooked, which is tasteless, putrid and stale which is of the leavings and unclean, is the food that is dear to the dull " (XVII 8 10)

" And now hear from me, O Arjuna, the three kinds of pleasure That in which a man comes to rejoice by long practice and in which there is an end to his pain, and that which is like poison at first, but like nectar at the end—such pleasure is said to be good It springs from a clear knowledge of the soul That which springs from the contact of the senses and their objects, and which is like nectar at first but like poison at the end—such pleasure is said to be passionate. But that which deludes the soul both in the beginning and even after the end, and which springs from sleep sloth and error—that pleasure is said to be dull " (XVIII 36 39)

## CHAPTER V

### FREEDOM THROUGH SERVICE

We are now in a position to understand the *Gita* doctrine of *Svadharma*. To interpret this doctrine merely in terms of caste duties and to say that every man is bound to follow the calling of the group into which he is born irrespective of his own innate capacities and tendencies is only to misunderstand the meaning of the Teacher. We have already seen that the whole aim of Krishna is to combat the view of Arjuna about *Jati-dharma* and *Kula-dharma* and to free the concept of Dharma from all external rules so as to make it conterminous with spiritual life. But if we take his teaching about *Svadharma* to mean only insistence on caste duties we are coming back to the same old *Jati-dharma* and *Kula-dharma*, of which

Arjuna spoke at the outset Krishna's insight goes much deeper than that. It penetrates all accidents of birth and circumstance to the core of man's own nature. His doctrine of *Svadharmā* is based on the rock of *Svabhāva*. For he says —

Better is one's own duty though imperfectly done, than the duty of an other well done. He who does the duty imposed on him by his own nature incurs no sin. One ought not to give up the work which is suited to one's own nature. O Arjuna though it has its imperfections for every enterprise is beset with imperfections as fire with smoke (XVIII 47-48)

It is true that Krishna appeals to Arjuna as a Kshatriya whose duty is to fight. He says —

Further if thou shouldst regard thine own duty thou shouldst not falter for to a Kshatriya there is no higher good than a righteous war (II 31)

But then he is thinking of an ideal society in which the division of classes is based on character and profession. For in a famous verse he says. The four castes were created by me according to the division of character and function

(IV 13) And subsequently to illustrate his theme he says "Heroism vigour firmness, resourcefulness dauntlessness in battle, generosity and majesty—these are the duties of a Kshatriya springing from his own nature. (XVIII 43)

It is to these qualities in Arjuna that Krishna is appealing when he asks him to follow his Svadharma and fight. If the Teacher had based his doctrine only on caste duties and not on duties imposed by one's own nature it would have had no permanent validity. As it is, his teaching is valid for all time and for all types of society. According to him every man should cultivate his own natural gifts, should be true to himself before he thinks of serving society or God. It is only then that he will be an efficient member of the community or an efficient servant of the Divine Master. It is only then that his actions will have not only efficiency but also ease, spontaneity and beauty. For beauty is nothing but the immutable grace which all creatures acquire when they are true to the law of their own being. A rose is beautiful when it approaches the ideal pattern of a rose and not that of any other flower. A horse is beautiful when

it approaches the ideal horse and not the ideal elephant. The world is rich in individual forms. Krishna says —

“Behold my forms, O Arjuna, by hundreds and thousands—manifold and divine and of varied hues and shapes” (XI. 5)

And when any individual form acquires efficiency or strength or grace it reveals and glorifies the work of God. As Krishna says, “Whatever being there is, endowed with grandeur, beauty or strength, know that it has sprung only from a spark of my splendour” (X. 41). And the way to acquire these qualities is to be true to one's own self, to perfect one's own aptitudes, to improve one's own gifts, to progress along the lines laid down by Nature—in a word, to act according to one's Svadharma. Thus the *Bhagavad Gita* is quite in accord with the most advanced educational theories of to-day, in holding that individuality is sacred and inviolable and that all an educator has to do is to make the child discover his Svadharma and to allow him free play to develop along his own lines.

But the *Gita* does not stop there. All that we have been saying so far about



Nature, individuality and Svadharma represents less than half of its teaching—and that the lower half. If this were all, Krishna would be only a good naturalistic philosopher, not a great World Teacher. Nature is no doubt our starting point, but God is our goal. We should not forget that if Nature is our mother God is our father. All our varied individualities find their fulfilment at last only in Him. Hence all our activities should have only one ultimate aim namely, our spiritual progress. We generally crave more for the immediate consequences of our actions than for their inherent rightness. We calculate their effects on our fortunes and not on our character. It often happens that that action which brings us the greatest material gain involves the greatest spiritual loss. In fact, what is sin but a sacrifice of our higher self to the desires and passions of our lower self? So the first thing that we have to do if we want to lead a religious life is to shift the aim of all our activities from the external world of men into the internal world of spirit. By doing so we find that we give a unity to our actions which they did not before possess. Also we find that

there is no such thing as defeat in spiritual life. For when we think a kind thought, say a good word or do a righteous deed we may succeed or fail in the world but we automatically raise ourselves in the kingdom of the spirit. Hence the *Gita* says at the very outset of its teaching —

“In this no effort is ever lost, and no harm is ever done. Even a little of this law saves a man from great fear. In this the resolute mind has a single aim, O Arjuna, but the thoughts of the irresolute are manifold and endless.” (II 40-41)

When we turn away from the material consequences of our actions to their spiritual values we discover a new world, as it were, and find ourselves co-operating with the spirit of God energizing the universe. Every effort in this direction adds to our strength and we grow indifferent to gain or loss, victory or defeat, pleasure or pain which our actions may bring us. The more we care for virtue, appreciate beauty or pursue truth for their own sake the nearer do we feel to God and the better fitted to be His instruments. Even our ordinary duties in life may be converted into opportunities for serving God and for furthering

His purpose. We have to lose ourselves, no doubt, in the beginning. We have to give up the material fruits of our actions. But we gain ourselves in the end. We discover our true selves.

This is real sacrifice—the sacrifice of the lower self to the higher self. This is real worship—the worship of spiritual values like Truth and Beauty. And it is only when a man discharges his duties in a spirit of worship and of sacrifice that he gains true freedom. For God's service is freedom itself. This in modern terms is Krishna's teaching which is sometimes called the doctrine of Nishkamakarma or disinterested work. This term *Nishkamakarma* is not a very satisfactory one, for it indicates only the negative side of the teaching, namely, the eradication of self-centred desire as a motive for action. But we are taught not only to eradicate kama or desire but also to substitute in its place yoga or fellowship with God. Love of God is to take the place of attachment to the world. So the term *karmayoga*, which brings out the positive side of the teaching, is a much better one.

But by whatever name we call it, the doctrine is epoch making in the history

of Hindu religious thought. Its importance lies first in that it reconciles two ancient and opposite schools of thought—those who preached salvation through works and those who preached salvation through renunciation of works. Secondly in that it gives a new meaning and importance to life on earth. Thirdly in that it brings heaven within the reach of all. And fourthly and above all in that it offers a solvent to the Law of Karma.

The great objection to a life of action from the standpoint of some teachers of religion was that it bound a man to the wheel of Samsara or the round of births and deaths. For the good or the evil fruits of actions in one life have to be reaped in the next and so on in endless succession. Therefore the best way of releasing oneself from this *Karma-bandha* or bond of action is according to these teachers, to practise *karma sanyasa* or renunciation of action. The way to obtain *Moksha* is to turn away from all activities of life and to attain to a state of actionlessness. One can imagine what will happen to a society if all its members begin to put this philosophy into practice. A life of renunciation and of contemplation is not for all. It is

only for a few choice souls. For the large majority of men, a life of action is the best and the most natural. And action should not be dreaded as something that forges bonds for us in this life or the next. It is not every kind of action that binds. There are also actions that release. Krishna points out that actions done through attachment to the world bind the soul but that actions done in a spirit of sacrifice and of service to God will not bind but release —

This world is fettered by work, unless it is done as a sacrifice. Therefore, O Arjuna give up thy attachments and do thy work as a sacrifice. (III 9)

Thus Krishna's great discovery is that the alternative to karma bandha is not karma sannyasa but karma yoga. His new doctrine is preached throughout the *Gita* in many eloquent passages from which a few selections may be given here. —

Work alone art thou entitled to and not to its fruit. So never work for fruit, nor yet desist from work. Work with an even mind. O Arjuna having given up all attachment. Be of even mind in success and failure. Evenness of mind is called Yoga. (II 47-48)

As ignorant men act from attachment

to their work, O Arjuna, so too should an enlightened man act, but without any attachment, so that he may maintain the order of the world. Let no enlightened man unsettle the minds of the ignorant who are attached to their work. Himself doing all works with faith he should make others do so as well" (III 25 26)

"He whose undertakings are all free from desire and self will and whose works are burnt up by the fire of knowledge—him the wise call a sage. Giving up attachment to the fruit of works, always satisfied, and depending on none, he is ever engaged in work—and yet he does no work at all" (IV 19 20)

"He who works without attachments, resigning his actions to God, is untouched by sin as a lotus leaf by water. With the body, with the mind, with the understanding and with the senses alone, men of selfless actions do their work without attachment, for the purification of their souls. A selfless man who has renounced the fruit of his actions attains to a disciplined peace of mind. But the man who is not selfless is impelled by desire and is attached to the fruit and is therefore bound" (V 10 12)

'Whatsoever thou doest, whatsoever thou eatest, whatsoever thou offerest, whatsoever thou givest away and whatsoever of austerities thou dost practise—do that as an offering to me. Thus shalt thou be free from the bonds of

works which bear good or evil fruits  
 With thy mind firmly set on the way of  
 renunciation thou shalt become free and  
 come to me. (IX. 27-28)

"Some sages declare that all works  
 should be abandoned as evil. Others  
 say that works of sacrifice, gifts and  
 penance should not be given up. Hear  
 now from me O Arjuna the truth about  
 resignation for resignation is declared  
 to be of three kinds O best of men  
 Works of sacrifice, gifts and penance  
 should not be given up but should be  
 performed. For sacrifice, gifts and  
 penance purify the wise. Even these  
 works should however be done with  
 surrender of attachment and of fruits.  
 This O Arjuna is my decided and final  
 view (XVIII 3-6)

## CHAPTER VI

### REST IN WORK AND WORK IN REST

Krishna's originality is seen not only in the formulation of the doctrine of *karma yoga* but also in his telling illustration of it from the way in which God works in Nature and in history. At every turn of his great argument he points to the example of *Iswara Himself*. God is not sitting idle in a remote heaven, He has not renounced His activities. He does not aim at reaching the state of 'actionlessness'. He is ever creating ever destroying. Under His direction Nature is producing every moment innumerable forms of life. The sun shines the winds blow and the earth revolves because God is working. And in this world of warmth and light creatures breathe, eat and grow, and man knows remembers and philoso-



phises—all because God is working. If He withdraws His hand from the work even for a second this whole structure, this vast machinery of worlds on worlds will collapse and disintegrate.

But more telling than this illustration from God's cosmic activity is Krishna's question—What has God to gain by all this unceasing work? Is there anything at all for Him to gain which He does not possess already? Why does He work? It is for the good of others, not of Himself, that He works. The Creator thus sets an example for all His creatures to follow. He is a perfect Karma Yogi for He never desists from work and His work is ever impersonal and disinterested. So man becomes most like God and one with Him when he works silently and unobtrusively for the good of the world with every trace of self removed. Karma Yoga involves not only the surrender of the fruit of action but also the agency of action. For the ideal Karma Yogi feels that it is not he that works but God through Him.

The final step in the exposition of his doctrine is taken by Krishna when he calmly states the paradox that though God is externally at work He is also

internally at rest. God works and yet He works not. There is the divine mystery. Work and rest are mysteriously combined and reconciled in Him. As Brahman the absolute eternal and impersonal Spirit He is always and everywhere quiescent but as Iswara the God who creates protects and destroys He is always and everywhere active. These are the two sides of the medal the two aspects of a single reality. God in relation to the world is like white light seen through a prism. The colourless beam and the coloured spectrum are one and the same. The practical lesson that Krishna draws from this mystery of God's being is that man also should work and yet be unaffected by his work. He should find rest in work and work in rest. This is possible *only when he* eliminates his self totally and allows the universal spirit to work through him saying 'Not my will but Thy will be done.' The above exposition of Karma-Yoga is nothing but a paraphrase of the following verses in the *Gita* —

Under my guidance Nature gives birth to all beings—those that move and those that do not move and by this means O Arjuna the world revolves  
(IX 10)

I give heat I hold back and send forth the rain. I am the life everlasting O Arjuna as well as death I am being as well as non-being (IX. 19)

The splendour which is in the sun and which illumines the whole universe, that which is in the moon and which is likewise in the fire—know it as mine.

And entering the earth I sustain all things by my vital force and becoming the sapful moon I nourish all herbs.

Becoming the fire of life I enter into the bodies of all creatures and mingling with the upward and downward breath I digest the four kinds of food.

And I am seated in the hearts of all from me are memory and knowledge and their loss as well (XV 12 15)

The four castes were created by me according to the division of aptitudes and works. Though I am their creator know thou that I neither act nor change.

Works do not defile me, nor do I long for their fruit. He who knows me thus is not bound by his works. (IV 13 and 14)

There is nothing in the three worlds, O Arjuna for me to achieve nor is there anything to gain which I have not already Yet I continue to work.

For if I did not continue to work unweaned O Arjuna men all around would follow my path

If I should cease to work these

worlds would perish and I should cause confusion and destroy these people." (III 22 24)

"This universe is everywhere pervaded by me in an unmanifested form. All beings abide in me, but I do not abide in them.

"And yet the beings do not abide in me. Behold, that is my divine mystery. My spirit which is the source of all beings sustains all things, but it does not abide in them." (IX 4 and 5)

"Men of old who sought deliverance knew this and did their work. Therefore do thy work as the ancients did in former times." (IV 15)

It should not be forgotten that in the Gita the doctrine of Karma Yoga is intimately connected with that of Svadharma. The former only indicates the way in which the latter has to be performed. Svadharma is the substance and Karma Yoga is the form. The duties that our own nature and position in life impose upon us have to be discharged without any attachment or desire for fruit and as an offering of worship to God.

"Him from whom all beings proceed and by whom all this is pervaded—by worshipping Him through the performance of his own duty does man attain perfection." (XVIII 46)

Discharged in this way our duties become our pleasures our obligation becomes our freedom. For the *Gita* clearly points out that as long as our actions involve any strain or are beyond our capacities or have any trace of rashness about them they are imperfect. In its usual way it classifies all actions into the three categories of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* —

' An action which is obligatory and which is done without love or hate and without attachment by one who desires no fruit—that is said to be one of 'goodness' But that action which is done with great strain by one who seeks to gratify his desires or by one who is prompted by a feeling of 'I —that is pronounced to be one of 'passion' While action which is undertaken through ignorance, without regard to consequences or to loss and injury and without regard to one's capacity—that is said to be one of 'dullness' (XVIII 23 25)

It is because one's Svadharma involves no strain and is organically related to one's Svabhava as the flower to the tree that the *Gita* insists so emphatically on it. All kinds of approach are, of course, acceptable to God. But the way of Svadharma is the easiest and the best

for us. For undertakings foreign to our nature are never spontaneous, never free from strain and artificiality. They are like "artificial teeth, glass eyes and patent wooden legs". Therefore the *Gita* as vehemently condemns *Para dharma* as it commends *Svadharmā*.

"Howsoever men approach me, even so do I accept them, for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine, O Arjuna" (IV 11)

This verse on toleration is often quoted. But its counterpart on concentration is not. It is only when we take the two together that we get a correct idea of Krishna's teaching which is echoed in the pillar edicts of Asoka and in the utterances of Mahatma Gandhi. If the verse given above is a Mahavakya on toleration its counterpart given below is one on concentration —

'Better is one's own dharma though imperfectly carried out than the dharma of another carried out perfectly. Better is death in going by one's own dharma, the dharma of another brings fear in its train' (III 35)

One of Asoka's pillar edicts is to the same effect —

'I devote my attention to all communities because all sects are revered by

me with various forms of reverence. Nevertheless personal adherence to one's own creed is the chief thing in my opinion.

And in our own day Mahatma Gandhi has said —

I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any

The polarity of the two principles involved in these great utterances may be applied by us to national policies in the present state of the world. Nations as well as individuals have their special aptitudes and gifts which they have to develop in the interests of the human family as a whole. Each race has to contribute its own share to the civilization of man. And all should co-operate in achieving the common end. What the *Gita* says about co-operation between the gods and men applies equally if not more so to the co-operation of the various races of men among themselves —

With this shall ye cherish the gods and the gods shall cherish you. Thus cherishing one another ye will obtain the highest good" (III 11)

Therefore it is wrong to reduce all

peoples to one dead level. And it is equally wrong for one nation to override another and to make that nation serve its own interests. It is wicked for any nation or any individual to say, as the imaginary man of devilish nature is supposed to say in the *Gita* —

'This I have gained to-day, and that longing will I fulfil. This wealth is mine and that also shall be mine hereafter.

'This foe I have slain and others too will I slay. I am the lord of all and I enjoy myself. I am prosperous, mighty and happy.

"I am rich and of high birth. Who is there like unto me?' I will perform sacrifices. I will give alms. I will rejoice.'  
(XVI 13-15)

This is, in effect, what Ravana and Duryodhana said, according to our epic poets. It is also, as the records of history show, what some of our ancient aristocracies—Kshatriyas and Brahmins—said. And it is this that some nations are saying to-day in the West and in the East. The same fate is awaiting them all. India teaches both by precept and by example.



## CHAPTER VII

### DEVOTION—MEDITATION— ACTION

It may be said that most men have no special aptitude of any kind and that their sphere of work is determined only by chance or accident. Has the gospel of Svadharma no message for them? The *Gita* makes no distinction between Svadharma and Svakarma. If nature imposes no obligations on us, habit, which is rightly called the second nature, does. What we are accustomed to doing every day in the profession we have entered—our daily round of duties in our office or our shop—may be made the basis of our Karma Yoga as easily as the special gifts of mathematical or musical genius. We shall be judged not by the work we do but by the way in which we do the work.

given to us. It is better to work in a small place with a large heart than to work in a large place with a small heart. Karma Yoga can illumine a hovel as well as a palace. The smaller the place, probably the more intense is the illumination. The *Gita* says in an oft quoted verse —

“All works with no exception culminate in Jnana” (IV 33)

But Karma Yoga can be satisfactorily performed only by those who cultivate the habit of contemplation and prayer and seek the help of God in controlling their desires and resisting the temptations that beset their path. The *Gita* therefore advises us to retire now and then into solitude to collect our thoughts and to concentrate our minds on the Supreme Spirit. The Dhyana Yoga that it recommends is quite simple and natural, unlike the elaborate technical Yoga later systematised by Patanjali in his *Yoga Sūtras*.

“Renouncing entirely all the desires born of imagination and restraining with his mind all the senses on every side, a man should gain tranquillity little by little and with a steadfast purpose concentrate his mind on the Spirit and think of no-

thing else. Whatsoever makes the wavering and fickle mind wander away—it should be withdrawn from that and brought back to the control of the Spirit. For Supreme Happiness comes to the Yogi whose mind is at rest whose passions are composed and who is pure and has become one with God (VI 24-27)

Similarly the *bhakti* or devotion to God that the *Gita* recommends is not the excessive emotionalism of the later Bhakti schools. There is no trace of exaggeration about it. It is in healthy contact with practical life and is calculated to lead the worshipper on his path to the knowledge of the Supreme Reality. Karma and Bhakti in the Gita supplement each other. There is no question of which is the more important of the two—the disinterested performance of duty or the seeking for the Grace of God through meditation and prayer. The two go side by side. The more we seek the Grace of God the more eager do we become to carry out His will.

Again the Bhakti that is taught in the *Gita* is a progressive feeling. With His usual catholicity Krishna recognises all forms of worship—the worship of the spirits, the worship of the gods, the wor

ship of the personal Iswara and the worship of the impersonal Brahman. He points out that it is man's own nature or capacity that determines his particular form of worship. All forms are acceptable to God as they are only His forms and He is behind them all. But He sends His grace in proportion to the quality of worship that is offered. The purer the worship the fuller is the Grace. As the worship of the gods and the spirits produces only limited results, Krishna calls upon all to progress towards the worship of the One Ruler of the Universe—a pure monotheistic worship. And as for the worship of God as personal Ruler or as the impersonal omnipresent Spirit, he says that it makes no difference at all, only the latter is a more difficult path for men as they are constituted in this world. The verses to be studied in this connection are these —

“Men in whom goodness prevails worship the gods, men in whom passion prevails worship demi gods and demons and others in whom dullness prevails worship the spirits and ghosts” (XVII 4)

“Those who worship the gods go to the gods, those who worship the manes

thing else. Whatsoever makes the wavering and fickle mind wander away—it should be withdrawn from that and brought back to the control of the Spirit. For Supreme Happiness comes to the Yogin whose mind is at rest, whose passions are composed and who is pure and has become one with God' (VI 24-27)

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"Those who worship the gods go to the gods, those who worship the manes

go to the manes those who worship the spirits go to the spirits and those who worship me come unto me." (IX. 25)

"Whatever may be the form which each devotee seeks to worship with faith—in that form alone do I make his faith steadfast.

"Possessed of the faith he worships that form and his desires are fulfilled, granted in fact by me alone." (VII 21 and 22)

"Even those who worship the other gods and are endowed with faith worship me alone, O Arjuna, though in the wrong way

"For I am the enjoyer and the lord of all kinds of worship. But these men do not know my real nature. Hence they fall' (IX. 23 and 24)

"Those who have fixed their minds on me and who, ever steadfast and possessed of supreme faith, worship me—they do I consider perfect in Yoga

' But those who worship the Imperishable, the Ineffable, the Unmanifested, the Incomprehensible they also come to me.

"The difficulty of those whose minds are set on the Unmanifested is greater, for the goal of the Unmanifested is harder for the embodied to reach." (XII 25)

Having thus fixed the best form of worship, the *Gita* points out the successive steps by which one can reach the

goal of Bhakti, namely, life in God. In the following verses the goal is given in the first verse and the way is then traced backwards to the early stage of Karma Yoga —

‘Fix thy mind on me alone, let thy thoughts rest in me. And in me alone wilt thou live hereafter. Of this there is no doubt.

“If thou art not able to fix thy mind on me O Arjuna, then seek to reach me by the practice of concentration.

“If thou art not able even to practise concentration of mind then devote thy self to my service. For even by doing service to me thou canst reach perfection. If thou art not able to do even this, then give up the fruit of all thy actions seeking refuge in me with thy mind subdued” (XII 8-11)

In other words, the ordinary duties of life discharged in a selfless spirit, religious works of devotion, exercises in meditation and unwavering concentration are the steps that lead one to the fullness of spiritual life in God. To those who try to tread this path and seek his help Krishna gives an assurance in resounding verses which have been a source of consolation to many a humble traveller through all the ages —

“Even if the most sinful man worships



me and worships no other he must be regarded as righteous, for he has decided aright.

He soon becomes righteous and obtains lasting peace. Proclaim it boldly O Arjuna that my devotee never perishes (IX. 30 and 31)

This assurance is given to one and all without any distinction. The only qualification that is required is an attempt on the part of men to turn towards God and seek His help. The moment this is done He whom the *Gita* describes as the Lord of all the worlds and the Friend of all creatures comes to dwell in their hearts out of His infinite compassion and dispels the darkness born of ignorance by the shining lamp of wisdom. These are not empty words. Every one who has made the attempt knows how mysteriously and in what strange ways light has come to him. He knows how often in his ignorance he has asked for a stone and bread has been given to him. He knows how the Helper has taken him by the hand ever since he trusted Him and has led him safely through the difficult and anxious moments in life how sometimes he ungratefully forgot Him when he emerged out of the darkness but soon

memory stung him and he fell prostrate on the earth and a thousand other things which make him say from his own experience that the following words of Krishna are literally true —

Fixing thy thought on me thou shalt surmount every difficulty by my grace  
(XVIII 58)

Grace is open to all There are no distinctions here of caste or creed or sex It is one of the glories of the Bhagavata theism founded by Krishna that it does away with all the old restrictions enforced by the orthodox teachers of the Veda Speaking particularly of caste and sex disqualifications the Teacher says —

Those who take refuge in me O Arjuna though they are of the lowest birth for their past sins—be they women or Vaisyas or Sudras—even they attain to the highest state (IX 32)

It is not according to caste or creed or sex that Krishna classifies his worshippers, but according to the aims of their worship —

Four types of righteous men worship me O Arjuna—the man in distress the man who wishes to learn the man who has an object to gain and the man of knowledge.

Of these the man of knowledge who has his devotion centred in One and who is ever attuned is the best For supremely dear am I to the man of

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knowledge and he is dear to me

"Great indeed are all of them But the man of knowledge—I deem him to be myself For being perfectly poised in mind he resorts to me alone as the highest way" (VII 16-18)

Thus according to Krishna the man of the highest knowledge is also the man of the highest devotion. There is no distinction between the highest Jnana and the highest Bhakti. In the lower stages they strengthen one another, but in the end they form one ineffable experience. Accordingly the Master never belittles Jnana as some of the later teachers of Bhakti do. On the other hand though the final word in the *Gita* is, as we shall see, one of Bhakti and Prapatti, that is, love and self surrender, Krishna repeatedly says that Bhakti leads to Jnana, that Love of God leads to a vision of Him —

'By devotion he knows me, knows me in truth, what I am and who I am. Then having known me in truth he forthwith enters into me.' (XVIII 55)

And after the miraculous transfiguration, in which Arjuna was privileged to see Krishna not as his friend and charoteer but as a cosmic being enveloping all creation as an awful dispenser of life and death, Krishna says —

'Neither by the Vedas nor by austerities, nor by alms-giving nor yet by sacrifice can I be seen in the form in

which thou hast seen me now

“But by devotion to me alone may I  
thus be known, truly seen and entered  
into, O Arjuna” (XI 53 and 54)

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## CHAPTER VIII

### THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE ONE

The important point to be noticed is that mere scholarship or intellectual knowledge is not Jnana. It is not by mere intellectual knowledge any more than by mere performance of rites and ceremonies that one realises God. It is by love and faith and exclusive devotion combined with right knowledge that one reaches that blessed state. Jnana is a difficult word to translate, and unfortunately it is used in both a higher and a lower sense. In the lower sense it means only intellectual knowledge, but in the higher sense it is both knowledge of and life in God. We can never know God as we know an object like a stone or a tree. For God is not an object but the universal subject. So the more we become like Him the more we know

## THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE ONE

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Him. Man, strictly speaking, cannot know God, but he can grow into Him. Here knowing and being are one. That is why Krishna speaks of His worshippers knowing Him, entering Him and abiding in Him—all in one breath. For it is all one experience. And that is why in His wonderful description of Jnana in the thirteenth chapter He includes not only a knowledge of God but also a number of ethical qualities and what is even more important, constant meditation and unswerving devotion to God —

“Modesty, sincerity, non violence, forbearance and uprightness, service of the teacher, purity, steadfastness and self-control,

“Indifference towards the objects of sense, self-effacement and the perception of the evil of birth, death, old age, sickness and pain,

“Detachment and freedom from identification with children wife and house, and constant evenness of mind in the midst of agreeable and disagreeable events,

“Unswerving devotion to me through constant meditation, resort to solitude and aversion to society, steadfastness in the knowledge of the spirit and an insight into the object of the knowledge of Truth—this is declared to be true

Jnana and all that is contrary to it is ajnana." (XIII 71)

The aim of all spiritual life is to attain to this state. Jnana, in the sense in which it is used here, is the highest state of knowing and being that man could reach. Krishna says that when a man has attained to Jnana nothing more remains for him to know. It is the best of all kinds of knowledge. By gaining it all sages have passed from this world to the highest perfection. Having devoted themselves to this knowledge and having partaken of the Divine Nature they are not born again at the time of creation, nor are they disturbed at the time of dissolution. (XIV 2) 'What is this knowledge of God that a Yogi gains by leading a strenuous life of selfless action and unswerving devotion?' The *Gita* begins this subject at the commencement of the seventh chapter with the introduction —

"Hear thou, O Arjuna, how by fixing thy mind on me and taking refuge in me and practising Yoga, thou mayest without any doubt have a full knowledge of me." (VII 1)

Here begins the metaphysical teaching of the *Gita* which is continued in the

succeeding chapters side by side with the ethical and religious teaching. In fact we may say that there are two streams of thought flowing through the *Gita*—the ethical stream and the metaphysical stream, the former setting forth what man ought to do and the latter what God is. In some chapters the ethical stream comes to the surface and the metaphysical stream goes under, in others the metaphysical stream comes to the surface and the ethical stream goes under and sometimes both the streams flow side by side.

God, according to the *Gita*, is both transcendent and immanent. His supreme abode is where "the Sun does not shine nor the moon nor fire." And yet all things in this universe are strung on Him "as gems on a string." Similarly, He is both the *Supra personal Absolute* "which does not perish when all beings perish" and the *personal Isvara* who creates, protects and destroys all beings. He is both *Nirguna* and *Saguna*. Hence the *Gita* gives the following antithetical description of God revealed to us by *Jnana* —

"I will now describe that which ought to be known and by knowing which im

mortality is gained. It is the supreme Brahman who is without beginning and who is said to be neither being nor non-being.

"His hands and feet are everywhere. His eyes, heads and mouths are facing in all directions. His ears are turned to all sides and He exists enveloping all.

"He seems to possess the faculties of all the senses and yet He is devoid of the senses. He is unattached and yet He sustains all things. He is free from the dispositions of Nature and yet He enjoys them.

"He is without and within all beings. He has no movement and yet He moves. He is too subtle to be known. He is far away and yet He is near.

"He is undivided and yet He is, as it were, divided among beings. He is to be known as the sustainer of all creation.

He devours and He generates.

"The light of all lights, He is said to be above darkness. As knowledge, the object of knowledge and the aim of knowledge He is set firm in the hearts of all" (XIII 12-17)

Again God is not only the immanent soul of the universe, but also its material body. He is the clay as well as the potter. Krishna describes the elements of earth, water, fire, air etc., as His lower nature and the immanent spirit as His higher nature. The former is the

*Kshetra* or the field and the latter is the *Kshetram* or the knower of the field. The former has three strands or levels of being—*Tamas*, *Rajas* and *Sattva*, which are almost equivalent to our modern terms, of physical, mental and moral. The qualities in varying proportions determine the individuality of creatures from the lowest to the highest. They provide them with their physical and their psychic equipment. *Sattva* or moral nature appears only in men. Those who have it least are said to be of a devilish nature and those who have it most are said to be of a divine nature. A devilish nature leads to further bondage while a divine nature leads to deliverance. The spirit in man is held a prisoner by the qualities of nature, by *sattva* as well as by *rajas* and *tamas*. For on a purely moral plane there is no salvation any more than on the intellectual or physical planes. Morality is like a boat in which we cross the sea of *Samsara*, but to reach the other shore we have to step out of the boat. The other shore is beyond good and evil. There we see the oneness of all. There the self is identified with all existence and all existence is, as we have seen, an

aspect of God. When we reach that state we are said to be in Jnana. For Jnana is the realisation of oneness. And Jnana is therefore *moksha* or deliverance. The following verses illustrate this position —

“Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, understanding and self-consciousness—such is the eightfold division of my nature. This is my lower nature, my other and higher nature—know that to be the immanent spirit, O Arjuna, by which the universe is sustained” (VII 4-5)

Sattva, Rajas and Tamas—these dispositions which arise from Nature bind down the immortal soul in the body, O Arjuna.” (XIV 5) \*

‘There are two types of beings created in this world—the divine and the devilish’ (XVI 6)

‘The divine nature is said to make for deliverance and the devilish for bondage.” (XVI 5)

“When the embodied soul has risen above these three dispositions of which the body is made up it gains deliverance from birth, death, old age and pain and becomes immortal” (XIV 20)

“When he sees that the manifold nature of beings is centred in the One and that all evolution is only from there—he becomes one with the Absolute.” (XIII 30)

The bliss of those who have reached this state after many lives of strenuous endeavour is described in the *Gita* in several verses of great beauty. It is not only their inner happiness that is described but also their attitude of all embracing love to the world. Having realised the oneness of all life they look upon others' pain as their own and are ever engaged in doing good to all creatures. Take for instance the following verses —

“The yogin who is happy within, who rejoices within and who is illuminated within becomes divine and attains to the beatitude of God

“Those whose sins are destroyed and whose doubts are removed, whose minds are disciplined and who rejoice in the good of all beings—such holy men attain to the beatitude of God

“Those who are free from desire and anger and have subdued their minds and realised themselves—around such austere men lies the beatitude of God”  
(V 24 26)

Or again take the following which are among the grandest verses in the *Gita* —

“Supreme happiness comes to the yogin whose mind is at rest, whose passions are composed and who is pure and has become one with God



"Steadfast in yoga he sees himself in all beings and all beings in himself—he sees the same in all

' He sees me everywhere and sees everything in me—I am never lost to him and he is never lost to me.

"The yogin who having attained to oneness worships me abiding in all beings—he lives in me, howsoever he leads his life.

"He who looks upon all as himself in pleasure or in pain—he is considered O Arjuna a perfect yogin." (VI 27, 29-32)

## CHAPTER IX

### DEVOTION TO HUMANITY

The *Gita* is unique among our scriptures in that it insists that even the highest mystic should do service to society and should worship God abiding in all beings. It points out that if Nature is our mother and God is our father all creatures are our brothers and sisters. It is Nature our mother that determines our Svadharma which is our starting point. It is God our father that inspires us with the love of Yoga which is our goal. And it is society consisting of our brothers and sisters, that imposes on us the duty of Lokasangraha or social service which is our path. Starting with our natural endowments we have to pass through the world doing our duty to society in a spirit of detachment and to reach our home in God. Thus the three words

{Svadharma, Loka-angraha and Yoga may be said to sum up the whole of the teaching of the *Gita*. A casual reader of the *Gita* is apt to lose sight of the middle term. And in fact unsympathetic critics of Hinduism often claim that social service forms no integral part of our religion, that our Sannyasa means quietism and that our God is indifferent to the sufferings of men. But it should be remembered that the maintenance of society in Dharma is the very end and aim of the Avatar as defined in the *Gita*. The example of Iswara Himself as an ideal Karma Yogin has already been pointed out. Similarly, in all its descriptions of an ideal Bhakti Yogin and an ideal Jnana Yogin the *Gita* includes the love of all creatures and service to them as an inalienable element in those characters. And on the other hand men of a devilish nature are indignantly condemned by the Lord in the sixteenth chapter of the *Gita* because their deeds and doctrines would result in the disruption of society. And lastly, the whole object of the *Gita* teaching is to make Arjuna do his duty by society and not run away from it as he pro-

poses to do at the beginning of the discourse.

Service to society is fundamental to the very concept of Hindu Dharma. That explains why separate mention is not made of it by our writers on religion and ethics. Dharma etymologically means that which binds society together, and society according to Hindu conceptions is an organism of mutually dependent and co-operating castes. The Hindu State, of which the king was only one of the limbs according to our ancient writers on political science, had for its aim only the maintenance of Dharma. It had no absolute rights as in the theories of European writers on political philosophy. The Hindu theory never recognised either the divine right of kings or the divine right of states. Dharma was above the secular power of the state. Nor was there a church with absolute powers embodying Dharma and vying with the state in jurisdiction. It was the great prophets and Rishis who from time to time adjusted the Dharma of their age and brought it into line with Yoga. We have already pointed out in an earlier study the organic connec-

tion that should exist between Yoga and Dharma. Our point here is that the Hindu theory of society and the state is such that it makes it obligatory for the individual to discharge his duty to society and at the same time to conserve all the spiritual values that belong to him as a child of God.

In similar manner the claims of both scriptural authority and spiritual freedom are reconciled in the *Gita*. Sometimes Krishna seems to speak like a fundamentalist insisting on the inviolable authority of the scriptures as in the following oft-quoted passage —

“Therefore let the scripture be thy authority in determining what ought to be done and what ought not to be done. Knowing the scriptural law thou shouldst do thy work in the world” (XVI 24)

But sometimes He speaks also like a revolutionary to whom no authority is sacred and inviolable, as in the following verse —

As is the use of a pond in a place flooded with water everywhere so is that of all the Vedas to a Brahman who knows. (II 46)

The great Teacher knows that it is the

duty of every teacher to efface himself gradually and set the pupil free from all external authority to act on his own initiative and learn by experience. Gurus and Sastras are like the floats that help a swimmer while he is learning to swim. But if in the end they cannot be dispensed with it means they have not fulfilled their purpose. Krishna has no use for authorities that remain outside authorities till the end without generating freedom within. It is when He is referring to the doings of bad men that He speaks of the authority of the scriptures as a guide to conduct, and it is when He is referring to a man who has attained to Jnana that He sets aside their authority. Similarly whenever He criticises men for their wrong actions wrong kind of *tapas* wrong method of dispensing charity wrong kind of sacrifice or wrong kind of firmness, He invokes the authority of rules and ordinances. But when He speaks of advanced souls—great Yogins of Bhakti or Jnana—He says they come to Him or live in Him whatever be their mode of life. This does not mean that they can do evil with impunity. It only

means that they need not observe the letter of the law, as they embody the spirit of it. It only means that they are in a position to say, 'The Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath' Thus Krishna would excuse neither the die-hard conservative who does not allow any departure from tradition, nor the reckless reformer who turns his back on all tradition and tries to cut himself off from the past. His own example in this matter illustrates His precept. His *Gita* is the very essence of the *Upanishads*, but the teaching of the old masters is given a new orientation in it. For instance, the older teaching about Sannyasa and Jnana is extended and given a new application. Sannyasa or renunciation is a thing of the heart and not a mere external observance. A man who remains in the world and works in a spirit of renunciation is as much a Sannyasin as he who has retired from the world and renounced all possessions. So what is important is that attachments should be given up, not actions. Similarly the older teaching about Jnana is retained but is applied to practical life. It is pointed out that the actions of a

man who has spiritual vision are better and of greater help to the world than those of a man who has no such vision. The ideal Yogi of the *Gita* is a practical mystic who lives in God but who works in the world, "whose head is in solitude but whose hands are in society" Again the old concept of Yajna undergoes a marvellous transformation in the *Gita*. Taking a hint from His master Chora Angirasa, of the *Chandogya Upanishad*, Krishna develops the principle of sacrifice so as to include in it not only material sacrifices but also all forms of service through self-control, through contemplation, through scholarship etc. Sacrifice is shown to be a cosmic principle —

"In the beginning it is along with sacrifice that the Creator created men and said, 'By this shall ye multiply and this shall be the Cow of Plenty which will yield unto you the milk of your desires.' " (III 10)

Similarly, again, as we have already pointed out, Krishna has widened the older concepts of Yoga, Dharma, Karma and Varna. He has in fact so extended the Upanishadic tradition as practically to recreate it. One import-



ant element he has added to that tradition and that is Bhakti, which is somewhat different from the Upasana of the old *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads*. And He considers the addition so important that it is on that note that He ends His great symphony

' Listen again to my supreme word, the most secret of all. Thou art well beloved of me, therefore will I tell thee what is good for thee.

' Fix thy mind on me, be devoted to me, worship me prostrate thyself before me so shalt thou come to me. I promise thee, truly, for thou art dear to me.

"Leaving aside all rules of Dharma, come to me alone for shelter. Do not grieve, for I will release thee from all sins' (XVIII 64-66)

The impressiveness of these words is unmistakable. No wonder that Sanjaya, who reports this discourse between Krishna and Arjuna to Dhritarashtra exclaims that it made his hair stand on end. No wonder he says —

' As often as I remember, O King, this wonderful and sacred dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna I rejoice again and again.

"And as often as I remember that

most marvellous form of Krishna,  
great is my astonishment, O King, and  
I rejoice again and again" (XVIII  
76-77)

